

## FAITHS OF A NEW ERA

### THE RESULT OF RELIGIOUS AND INTELLECTUAL LIBERTY.

Rev. Professor Swing in Central Music Hall, Chicago, on Unclassified Christians. Progress of the Church — Literary Thought in Advance of the Clergy.

Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you.—Matthew vi. 33.

In the philosophical rooms of the colleges there is generally to be found some color wheel where the rapid motion and the shifting of disks make the pink turn to red and the red hasten into purple or gold. So there are sound wheels which make a new tone as the velocity of the wheel is increased or diminished.

These instruments illustrate the flexibility of the human mind and ask us to mark how it changes its color or its musical tone. Some new velocity has been imparted to the wheel, and the tone has risen; some wand has touched the revolving disks, and a new color is before the gaze of the studying class. What wand has touched the color wheel? These are not the tints we saw not long since. What hand has turned the tone wheel? These are not the notes that came first.

As in summer it is delightful to look out over sea or land and watch the changes wrought in rapid succession by sun and object, field, hill or cloud, so it is a pleasure to mark the scenery that the human race creates from age to age out of its thoughts and feelings.

Not long ago some new elements entered into the construction of society, and we ought not to wonder if new results are coming from such new causes. If political and intellectual liberty is what all the great men of all times have declared it to be, it should not dwell in our country a hundred years without leaving some marks of itself. More eloquence has been created by liberty and uttered over it than any other of the prizes for which the heart has longed. In its name all the ancient and modern orators won their laurels, for freedom is the soil, the rain and the sunbeam out of which the soul elaborates its blossoms and its fruits. At her shrine all the greatest statesmen have worshiped, and for her defense many willingly have died.

#### Influence on Public Life.

How could such a political and mental virtue live and act in our continent more than a century without causing some new color to come to public life and public thought? Our geologists in uncovering some of the imbedded rocks find in them the tracks of birds that ran before a hailstorm 10,000 years ago. The point of the hail drops is seen in the surrounding rocky floor. But how could liberty cross and recross this continent so often and yet leave no footprints in its expanse of intellect? This has always been a sensitive nation. It has never been heartless. It has always been susceptible of laughter and tears. Recall how sensitive it was when King George ordered our fathers to buy their paper and tea of him; how sensitive when England pressed our laborers into her service on the sea; how sensitive when slavery attempted to plant itself in the great west; how sensitive when slavery attempted to set up a nation of its own in states stolen from the domain of freedom. And yet amid this sensibility freedom has been at work while three generations have come and gone.

Some results of liberty ought by this

time to be visible. When made a partner of education, it creates a humanity that subjects all old ideas to weight and measurement and is bold to discard what cannot stand all the new tests of an enlightened and free reflection. This liberty and reflection have made great changes in all departments of public opinion, but nowhere is change more marked than in the field of religion.

#### Righteousness and Benevolence.

There were centuries in which the church was the greatest idea of Christianity. To find the true church and to get into it was the only hope for this world and the next. By a long process of debate and experience the church idea has fallen not a little in importance and instead have come into religion two dominant principles—righteousness and benevolence—the upright soul within and kindness toward all that is outside of self. Our century has exalted the right and the merciful until they overshadow all the doctrines which used to be emblazoned and defended so pompously. Christ not only remains, but he has been exalted by every movement of the age toward a new uprightness and mercy. He had no spires, no church, no pulpit, no pew, no organized society, but only the most perfect of human characters. He was so just that all who came to him came to righteousness; he was so benevolent that all who came near him were encircled by love.

In all former times opinions were made stationary by authority and custom. The people did not possess education enough to enable them to perceive some new idea, and so old and powerful was custom that the community did not desire any new ideas. Liberty soon removes this weight of custom. Having been playing its part for a generation or two, it sets the individual free from all the old restraints, and new ideas come as easily as new buds to a tree or new smiles to the face. Under the escape from the force of custom slavery fell, the rapid boats and cars came, woman arose to a new light, education became general. What had long been chains of steel became only spider webs.

#### False Customs Laid Aside.

Custom and authority had long held the churches and their creeds in place, but a hundred years of free thought are enough to make havoc of custom unless the custom is founded upon perpetual fact. It is difficult for a false custom to remain stable under the air of liberty. Each day man's thought attacks it. The blows seem harmless at first, but after a long time the error falls.

In an old poem the writer speaks of an iceberg floating in the polar wave. It can pass many years drifting in such icy waters. At last some wind or current catches it and moves it southward. It is powerless to go back. Its awful mass creeps slowly along toward the parallels of wheat and grass. On it moves, still a mountain, alarming the sailors and chilling many miles of the surrounding air. Weeks and months bring it to the confines of a full glowing summer, and at last, with the ocean all warm around it, with hot winds smiting it and with a glowing sun over it, it melts, it dissolves, its proud adamant becomes gentle drops of water in the sea. Thus iron customs drift strong and cold in despotic times, but when some change of current sweeps them far off into the summer of liberty they lose their lofty vanity, they melt, they perish.

#### Literary Leadership.

Literature is running in advance of the church. There are three reasons for

this leadership. The literary minds have been more gifted and more ambitious than those that have entered the pulpit. High literature offers both more gold and more fame. The literary mind has all the world of thought to draw from. If you will read Carlyle or Hugo or Motley or Ruskin, and then will read some theological work or some volume of sermons, you will note the great difference between the breadth of the two forms of reflection and speech. The second reason for the leadership of literary men is found in their release from the authority and custom that dominate the fields of theology. Their style and subject matter are as flexible as silk. Their harp not only plays many tunes, but it is permitted to learn all the great pieces of new music.

Another reason for this literary domination is found in the fact that the high letters can deal only in universal ideas, because they do not speak to a Catholic or a Calvinist or to a Democrat or to a Whig, but to mankind. When religion comes into literature, it enters in the name of the human race, and if Leo XIII or a Hindoo monk reads the paragraph he recognizes the thought as his own. The nineteenth psalm could be read with delight by all pious minds upon earth, for if there be between the poles a thousand different religions, with shrines in Europe or in the heart of Africa, in all places alike would men welcome the words "The heavens declare the glory of God."

#### Wedded to Universal Truth.

Nearly all the evolutionists would join also in the hymn, for they believe that a supreme God put into the atoms some potency that would gather themselves into the planets and suns and put into the humblest life a power that would lead that living germ up to the high form and nature of the human creature. Being thus wedded to universal truth, the men of literature outran the church and reached first those central ideas which now are slowly enveloping the millions of our nation. God as delineated in the church is loved by but a few, but as seen in literature he is loved by the human race.

We hear allusion often to the gospel of John Ruskin. What is it? It is not that of Leo XIII or of any of the great magnates of Christianity. If we read the early books of that "Graduate of Oxford," we find the religion of uprightness and benevolence. So tender hearted was he that in his "Architecture" he taught that each house should have a porch to which the passerby could run from a sudden storm of rain or hail. Beauty, nature, honesty, love and worship compose the gospel of Ruskin.

What was the gospel of Browning? What that of Tennyson? What that of Whittier? What the gospel of Longfellow? Thus name might be added to name until we should seem encompassed by a celestial army—all soldiers of Christ indeed, but of Christ incarnate in human character and human deeds.

#### The Gospel of Great Men.

It is not thought to be the full right of speaker or essayist to illustrate by the names of persons who are not yet dead, but illustration need not imply any high eulogy. We cannot be blind to the fact that the minds like Lyman Abbott, Washington Gladden, William T. Harris, Hamilton Mabie, are growing more numerous rapidly, and that this army is not swelled and recruited from the ignorant and eccentric, but from the halls of learning and from the paths of high genius. The churches all stand encompassed by these religious minds whose gospel is that of Ruskin and of the

wide domain of letters. By the grave of Phillips Brooks one might remember that here he also stood, his robe as bishop not separating him far from the men of letters near whom he lived all his attractive life. Of these emancipated thinkers the living group is no longer composed of a few individuals, but of many thousands. They are found in the office of the schoolmaster; they abound in the rolls of the college professors; they think their new thoughts and read their new books in the homes of the lawyer and the doctor; they abound in that multitude of young men and young women who are just leaving school to take their first steps in the borders of adult life. These swarm still more numerous in France and Germany, for in these lands intellectual liberty has played its part for generations. When all are counted, the army is large, and as noble as it is extensive. The church indeed helped create these higher souls. It baptized them when they were children; it taught them the simplest precepts of religion; it awakened piety, but the church was not great enough to gratify their souls forever. It was a beautiful base in which the acorn could send up its first leaf, but not the great, rich words in which the plant could become an oak and exult under the boundless sky. Is the church henceforth to lead man only when he is a little child? Has it no doctrines and deeds for life's noon and for life's sunset?

#### At Many Altars.

While liberty and education are creating a new center of faith and a religious throng outside the church, the railway is aiding and abetting this spirit of independence. So many individuals and families are now carried from place to place, from city to city and from home to home, that to almost millions no one altar ever remains dear. The local church is not as sacred as it was when families lived and worshiped for many generations in one house of prayer. When you read the elegy composed in the English graveyard, you are in the presence of yew trees that have sighed over the graves of father and mother and child repeated over and over for hundreds of years. To be outside of that house was to be away from home and heaven. All not in that ivy covered sanctuary are under its sod. But our railways have made homesickness only a historic disease. The rapid car is the science that has cured that old affection of the heart. And as men and families go with ease away from home, so easily they sunder all ties to the altar where once they may have chanted a few hymns or lisped a few prayers. The tie that holds us to the center being broken, we fly off into the circumference.

It is certain the church is unconsciously aiding all this outside piety. Many of the orthodox clergy who occupy high places in populous neighborhoods are preaching not the gospel of their creed, but the gospel of Ruskin and Whittier and of the thinking world.

Unless the church shall thus join with all moralists in creating a better world, one cannot dare promise orthodoxy a bright future. The gulf between the literary men, the scientific men and the simple humanitarians on the one bank, and the church on the other bank, will become deeper and will be as bridgeless as the same gulf was in the dark days of the French revolution. On the basis of piety, right and love the educated men can come to us and we can go to them. Society was in past times made a unit by means of despotism and custom and a large admixture of ignorance.